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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 RABAT 001579

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: A TERRORIST PLOT: EXPOSURE AND DISCUSSION

REF: A. RABAT 01450
[1](#)B. RABAT 01540
[1](#)C. RABAT 01516
[1](#)D. RABAT 01504
[1](#)E. RABAT 00918
[1](#)F. RABAT 01371

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On August 8, security forces reported in the press that forty-four (44) suspected terrorists were arrested in July and accused of preparing to conduct terrorist attacks. Five of the arrested are Moroccan soldiers specializing in explosives. The terrorists have been widely criticized as a threat to "the societal project of progress and modernity in which the country is engaged." (Al Bayane, August 10) Press reports recognized the danger of other cells in the military and the presence of a terrorist threat which some said could be more pervasive than the May 16, 2003 Casablanca bombings. The unprecedented number of press reports through August 22 point to the king's, and his advisors' (the "makhzen"), desire to affirm the stability of the country under the rulership of the king. The message is that "everything is under control." End Summary.

Comments

[1](#)2. (C) The unprecedented number of press reports (reftel C and below) on this terrorist cell provide threads of interpretation when understood in the context of the July 30 Throne Day speech and recent events in Lebanon. While the front pages of the newspapers focused on Lebanon, the major local story was the dismantling of the cell during the period August 8-22. The press reports, based on unidentified "informed sources," tell the story of how GOM security forces successfully dismantled the cell. (Note: The cell was dismantled in July, but not reported until August, following the Throne Day speech, reftels A, D. End Note.) While little "hard" evidence was shared by the informed sources, security forces found propaganda, CDs and explosives at the six sites (MAP, August 8). Five of the cell members were members of the military, raising the issue of the possibility of the military being "infiltrated." Throughout the reports, the story's central theme is consistently reiterated: the GOM security forces are working to rid Morocco of a terrorist threat. Because of the security forces, the Moroccan community, to which the king referred in his Throne Day speech (refrels A, D), remains intact.

13. (C) One of the threads in the story is that the cell is "pan-Muslim." In the initial August 8 reports, the cell was identified as Shi'a (reftels B, C), with some reports saying that the Shi'a population in Morocco is "growing" (Liberation, August 10); whereas, successive reports identified the cell as Al-Qa'ida, which is Sunni. The notion that the cell was Shi'a, while it was quickly dropped, allowed the reading public to conclude that terrorism in Morocco does not emanate from only one branch of Islam. At the same time, readers were able to identify with terrorism in other parts of the "Arab World," making Morocco the same as those places experiencing daily assaults from "insurgents" or terrorists.

14. (C) Another story thread was that there were connections between isolated terrorist activities in different places. For example, links to the London terrorist group (August 7), comprised of British citizens of Pakistani origin, were made when the press reports noted that the same arms were found in London as in Morocco; or, links to Iran were suggested when the press reports claimed that cell members traveled to Iran to study the Iranian Revolution. The detonation devices used by the terrorist group were reported to be the same as those used in the 2004 Madrid terrorist attacks (Aujourd'hui le Maroc, August 22). Other press reports indicated funding from Al-Qa'ida and other international accomplices; and, that the leader of the movement is a former Salafi-Jihadist detainee, creating links with Gulf movements. This thread was further expanded by tying it to investigations by Spanish and other European police which confirmed the fear of an international terrorist network that will pose a threat to Europe and North Africa (Assahrah Al Maghribiya, August 17).

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15. (C) While the press reports appeared to be open, there were few details on the cell provided. (Note: On August 22, however, the names of thirty-two (32) participants were printed in the Arabic press (septel). End Note.) The overarching story thread appeared to be that terrorist versions of Islam could threaten Morocco's development as a modern nation. The press consistently viewed the "dream" of an Islamist nation as negative. (Note: The constitution states that Islam is the religion of the state, reftel E, and the king is the "Commander of the Faithful," which the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO) refuses to recognize. The press is denouncing the JCO's "dream" of the immediate abolition of the monarchy and the institution of a caliphate, reftel F. End Note.) What the press was really saying is that a version of an Islamist nation other than that of the king, the Alaouite dynasty, and what is in the constitution will not be tolerated. Morocco prides itself on being a "moderate" Muslim nation -- the message is that extreme interpretations of religion cannot and will not be tolerated.

16. (C) In the king's Throne Day speech, he reassured Moroccans that the country is stable and secure, reftels A, 1D. (Note: Only the official aspects of Throne Day celebrations took place, i.e., there were no crowds gathered for the usual events such as horse shows or "fantasias." End Note.) With the dismantling of the cell, it appears that the press reinforced the message of stability and security the king was sending on Throne Day.

17. (C) The latest press (August 17-22) has focused on terrorist finance sources, reporting links with two wealthy women in Casablanca, one of whom teaches religious lessons in her villa (Al Ahdath, August 18), bank and money transfer vehicle robberies, counterfeit money, prostitutes (L'Opinion, August 18), and drug dealers, which some press reports claimed ceased activities in light of the investigations (Ahdath al Maghribiya, August 22). The press seems to group all these illicit activities--and private religious activities--into one overarching criminal network that presents a threat.

Newspaper Reports: Background for Comments

18. (U) French and Arabic newspapers from August 8-22 focused on the "Jama'at Ansar al Mehdi," (Organization of the Partisans of the Mehdi), a previously unknown terrorist network, which was dismantled by security forces. A Ministry of the Interior (MOI) communique affirmed that the cell was not known previously. A summary of the reports is:

-- The 44 members of a cell were arrested in Casablanca, Youssoufia (near Rabat), Sidi Yahya Gharb, Sale (Rabat's sister city), Sidi Slimane, and Tetouan. Five of the members were from the military and trained in explosives. The group was led by a former Salafi-Jihadist detainee, Lahssen El Khattab, who recruited, supervised, and trained radical Islamists to handle explosives in the northern regions of Nador and Ouezzane. Khattab was arrested after the 2003 Casablanca bombings and spent two years in prison before being pardoned by the king. Investigations have shown that the group planned to finance its terrorist activities through bank and money transport vehicle robberies along with contributions from its members. Explosives, laboratory, communication, and propaganda material were seized during home search operations. (MAP, August 8)

-- In a front page editorial by Abdelmounaim Dilami, President of the Federation of Moroccan Publishers and director of L'Economiste, said that members of the group had a Shi'a orientation, were influenced by the Iranian revolution, and made trips to Iran in order to study it. "The Arab-Muslim world is the object of all sorts of aggressions. Those that seek to destroy, to break the economy and install terror in this country are criminals...They must be combated firmly, because it is our present and our future that they are destroying. The return to a Golden Age of Islam is a senseless dream. On the other hand, constructing a modern and prosperous Muslim nation is a dream worth the effort to realize." L'Economiste August 9)

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-- Expert on Islamic movements Mohamed Darif stated that the group is associated with "hard-line Sunni theology" and not Shi'ism (Le Matin, August 9)

-- Recruiting from the military demonstrates a shift in the recruitment strategy of terrorist cells. (Al Ahdath Al Maghribiya, August 10)

-- Mohamed Darif stated that extremist groups in Morocco have begun to recruit soldiers in order to secure weapons and explosives. The possibility of arms theft for terrorist means has raised great concern within the military. Security sources reported that Khattab had chosen two areas in Nador and Ouazzane to begin military training for his cell. (Assahra, August 10)

-- Moroccan security is investigating the possibility of terrorist sleeper cells within the military. Members of the network planned to bomb a series of tourist sites and luxury hotels, imitating the Sinai attacks in Egypt. The cell planned for attacks to be more "violent" and "savage" than the 2003 Casablanca attacks. Investigations revealed that members of the cell had frequent contact with Al-Qa'ida -- the network strived to become an Al-Qa'ida branch in Morocco. The Moroccan intelligence agency (DGST) had been alerted earlier in the summer by Spanish and British secret services about possible terrorist attacks in Morocco. (Al Ittihad al Ichtiraki, August 10)

-- Senior military official, General Belbachir, was dismissed as a result of the arrests. The soldiers arrested were stationed at an air base in Sale and were recruited through

their wives, who were reportedly "very active" in some outlawed Islamist groups. Most of the cell participants come from the poorest areas of Sale, including Hay Arrahma, Hay Ouadee Addahab, Tabriquet, and Layadiya. (Bayane Al Youm, August 10)

-- "Terrorism is nourished by ideas developed by diverse strains of fundamentalism that work, consciously or not, for the intrusion of religion into the political sphere, in such a way that all political, economic, social, and cultural activity is judged by ancient Islamic criteria, and especially Shari'a...(One must state) sadly that the ideological fight against fundamentalism, which spawns terrorism, is not being led in all echelons and by all. If, in the heart of society, certain political and civil society organizations, and, if at levels of the state apparatus certain ministers and agencies, make the necessary effort to analyze the dangers of fundamentalism and adopt clear and strict responses...(Note: The paper is accusing the GOM of not sufficiently responding to the terrorist threat political Islam can bring, as it hopes political Islam will counterbalance the "Left." End Note.) (This is) because they are minimizing the gravity of the phenomenon, considering that moderate Islamism could be managed by making it an essential component of society. (This is) because (in their) calculations, politicians aim to make political Islam a counterweight to the revolutionary ideas of the left, who laud the extension of freedoms, of integral democracy and of social justice as a solution to class struggle and capitalist exploitation." (Al Bayane, August 10)

-- "After the proliferation of Wahhabi movements, now is the turn for the Shi'a networks to establish a foothold in Morocco...(Moroccan officials) have, for a long time, encouraged the establishment and the diffusion of the Wahhabi ideology. Various reasons linked to foreign policy and public finances justified this choice. The May 16 terrorist attacks ended this honeymoon., The hardening of tone and of method have indeed put the sympathizers of this strain behind bars. In addition, according to certain sources, the number of Shi'ites in Morocco is growing. The official attitude towards this trend of thinking has (discouraged) its members from evincing clearly their belief. The dismantling of the terrorist group Jama'at Ansar al Mehdi, highlights the weight of this group, which succeeded in enrolling five soldiers who are experts in explosives. (This) must surely (cause) the different military intelligence services (to question) the number of extremist soldiers in the ranks of Royal Army Forces." (Liberation, August 10)

-- "We have to be aware that we are not out of danger and

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that what could come could be worse than the May 16 terrorist actions." (Al Ittihad al Ichiraki, August 10)

-- Khattab nominated Yassin al-Wardi (aka Abu Abdallah), a retired soldier, to be the "Amir" in charge of the cell. (Assabah, August 11)

-- "The dismantlement of the terrorist network in Morocco shows that Morocco is still under a terrorist threat...Morocco is a Muslim country and religion is (an issue) between the individual and his creator. (Generating support by resorting to) a populism that is facile but politically profitable, all the while maintain a Manichean vision, is no longer tenable. One should stop playing with fire." (Independent French-language daily Aujourd'hui le Maroc, August 11)

-- "If the dismantlement of the Ansar al Mehdi, network did not draw our political leaders out of their summer torpor -- which is indeed identical to the other seasons -- then there are some real worries for the future of this country. Apart from some rare professional (reactions) from the print media...the public broadcast media pole was (operating with)

minimum services -- which is already the rule in normal times -- exacerbated by summer hours, vacations and the ostensible resignation of certain officials...We repeat, once again, that the criminal banalization of fundamentalist posturing, generated by grave political compromises, has ended up weakening the immune defenses of society. The Salafist fundamentalists are taking advantage of this enormous failure of Moroccan democracy." (Aujourd'hui le Maroc, August 11)

-- Khalid Naciri, member of the Political Bureau of the PPS, said that Morocco is "still in the eye of the tornado" and that Morocco is "not out of the danger zone." He called on people to remain "vigilant in order to protect our society and the modernist and democratic option for which Morocco has opted." The participation of soldiers in the terrorist activities indicates that "no institution is immune from danger," but he insisted that the Royal Armed Forces (RAF) were still "sane" and that those arrested were "isolated individuals that belong to an institution we must protect." (Al Bayane, August 14)

-- A front page article described dismissals in the army following the arrests, including that of Casablanca military base chief Major Col Morad Belhsen, and the reorganization of the Secret Services (DEST). (Note: Senior military official General Belbachir was dismissed. End Note.) Leaders of the Koutla (Note: The Koutla is the democratic alliance of the USFP, Istiqlal, and the PPS. End Note.) warned that Morocco is still under the threat of terrorism. Media outlets are asking authorities to reveal to the public the material seized during the arrests. At least three more arrests were made during the weekend (August 12-13) and authorities are still searching for important members of the cell in the northern city of Ouzane. (Al Ittihad al Ichtiraki, August 14)

-- Moroccan authorities tightened security procedures in order to prevent members of the cell from escaping the country. (Assahrae al Maghribiya, August 14)

-- The second batch of defendants of the terrorist group, which constitute the "military wing," are expected to be brought before the investigating judge in charge of terrorism at the Rabat Court of Appeals. The wing is considered "the most dangerous." On August 11, the national judiciary police brought nine new suspects, in addition to the first 32-member batch of defendants, before the public prosecutor in Rabat. Despite media reports that there were two women involved, the defendants are all male. The ages of the men indicate that they were "in the early stages of their professional careers, contrary to earlier reports that they were retired military personnel." Highly sophisticated tools were seized that resembled those found in connection with the terrorist plot recently dismantled in Britain. The network had planned suicide operations in hotels, following "Zarqawi's model." The first attack was planned on the military base in Sale where the soldiers worked and included "liquidating" military personnel serving on the base. The extremists planned to use cell phones to detonate explosions. Authorities are searching for a four-member gang that is suspected of having

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ties with the terrorist network. The gang stole 100,000 dirhams (approximately USD 12,000) from a Western Union agency in Settat, 40 km from Casablanca. (Assabah, August 14)

-- The police are searching for warehouses of weapons. There are many Islamist leaders in the Ansar , group, and not just Khattab -- many of the new members are "well-educated" and "specialized in technology." An anonymous government official stated that "the security agencies are doing their work" and that "the Moroccan political class is unanimous behind opposing terrorism." (Al Ittihad al Ichtiraki, August 15)

-- The leaders of the terrorist network have ties with drug

dealers in the North which financially assist their activities. Police discovered a video tape introducing Ansar al Mehdi,, which the group intended to make public after its first terrorist action in Morocco. There may be many more than five soldiers involved -- other "Islamist soldiers," especially single soldiers at the Sale military base, are being questioned. Some members of the police might also be implicated. (Al Andath Al Maghribiya, August 15)

-- The group received financial support from Al-Qa'ida and other unnamed organizations. The group's targets included; the Sale military base, a famous restaurant in Marrakech, military bases in order to steal armaments, and the U.S. Embassy in Rabat. The group also planned to conduct a suicide bombing operation in a Marrakech hotel. Sources said that Khattab conceived his plan while serving his two-year jail sentence for his involvement in the Casablanca bombings. He planned to use prostitutes to blackmail targeted government officials. (Al Alam, August 17)

-- Ten other soldiers were arrested under suspicion of involvement with the cell. Investigations are taking place in all military bases in Morocco, focusing on soldiers suspected of having fundamentalist ideas. Investigations indicate that Ansar al Mehdi, operates in a "highly decentralized fashion," which has complicated the search for its other members. (Al Ittihad al Ichtiraki, August 17)

-- Spanish police are on "high alert" after the dismantlement of the terrorist group in Morocco. Secret services from Spain and other European countries are closely watching Islamic extremism from North Africa -- they are suspicious of a formation of a unified terrorist group targeting countries in Europe and North Africa. (Assahrah Al Maghribiya, August 17)

-- Two wealthy women in Casablanca may have financed Khattab. One woman, Fatima Zohra (aka Um Sa'ad), received Khattab in her luxurious Casablanca villa and held religious lessons. Zohra provided up to 150,000 dirhams (approximately USD 17,000) to Khattab (Al Ahdath, August 18)

-- Members of the terrorist group detonated three homemade bombs prior to their arrest. Khattab did not allow his followers to pray in mosques. (Al Ahdath al Maghribiya, August 22)

-- After analyzing the explosives tested by the "Ansar al Mehdi" group, the National Brigade of Justice Police (BNPJ) police found that they are of the "same category" as those used in the 2003 Casablanca attacks, and the detonation system is similar to that used in the March 11, 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid. Yassine Ouardini, Badr Bouziki, and Toufik Oukeddi were soldiers working at the air base in Sale whom "established, in agreement with their boss, a plan to liquidate several people and to conduct a series of attacks on specific targets, notably in Marrakech." They also planned to attack in the air base in Kenitra to procure arms. The police also located the Khattab's "training camp" in an enclosed area in the north of Morocco near Ajdir. The group accumulated 70,000 dirhams (approximately USD 8,000) in fake bills. (Aujourd'hui le Maroc, August 22)

19. (U) An article in the Algerian daily, L'Expression, entitled "Purge in Moroccan Army Foils Presumed Plot Against King," claims that the terrorist cell was expecting to "overthrow the current Moroccan regime and set up an Islamic state (caliphate)." The Royal Gendarmerie has "return(ed) in force," to control an army that "has already attempted two

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putsches" since Morocco's independence. "It seems, however, that this third attempt had different political motivations, since it was colored by Islamism." The members should be tried this coming fall. It is a possibility that some will be brought before the Royal Armed Forces permanent tribunal

and others could be prosecuted by the Rabat Court of Appeals,
which has domestic territorial jurisdiction for terrorism.
L'Expression August 13)

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